

Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Amos Tuck

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

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Amos Tuck and Abraham Lincoln

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When Abraham Lincoln arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1847 to start his only term in the House of Representatives, the only seat left in the "Great Hall" was near the back. Next to him sat Amos Tuck of Exeter. Tuck and Lincoln were of different political parties and often voted on opposite sides of issues, but the two men formed a friendship and 12 years later, Tuck's newly formed Republican Party would catapult Lincoln onto the national stage.

Amos Tuck was born in Parsonsfield, Maine, in 1810. His family was originally from Hampton, N.H., but hoped to find better farm land in Maine. Tuck himself never cared for farming and from an early age longed to pursue a more educated vocation. In his autobiographical sketch, published in serial form in the Exeter News-Letter in 1920, he recalled, "little besides the monotony of farm work entered into my life till 16 or 17 years of age." He begged his father to send him to a tuition school, but the family finances prohibited such expenditure. For the next decade, Tuck tried again and again to obtain the college education he desired. He taught school, worked in the fields and tutored students to earn money. Offered scholarships on several occasions, he turned them down because all required him to join the ministry. Tuck had set his sights on becoming a lawyer. His father never seemed to understand his son's ambition and regularly discouraged him from further education — saying the time and expense it would require would only prevent him from earning an honest living.

Likewise, Abraham Lincoln's father never understood his son's desire for knowledge. Lincoln grew to be a powerful, strong young man and yet he seemed to waste his physical attributes, spending his time reading instead of plowing. Like Tuck, once he reached his late teens he no longer felt obligated to his father. It was perhaps these early experiences that brought the two men together when they met in Congress.

Tuck was finally able to attend and graduate from Dartmouth College, and passed the New Hampshire bar in 1838. He was quickly drawn into politics, becoming a member of the Democratic Party in New Hampshire. But by the 1840s he had become disillusioned with the party over the question of slavery. The annexation of Texas, with its subsequent extension of slavery into new territory, was looming. Tuck wasn't a supporter of slavery, but like most New Englanders, was willing to tolerate it where it already existed. Texas would nearly double the slave-holding territory in the United States, and the question of whether slavery should be extended in other western territories was unresolved.

The Democratic Party in New Hampshire was in the death grip of pro-slavery men like Franklin Pierce. It prompted Tuck to hold a meeting in February of 1845, in the vestry of the First Parish Church in Exeter to oppose the party platform. The meeting was held on Saturday, Feb. 22. The group, calling themselves "Independent Democrats," wrote a series of resolutions opposing the expansion of slavery into the territories and the annexation of Texas in particular. John P. Hale was nominated as candidate for the Senate and surprised everyone by winning the election. He would be the sole anti-slavery voice in the U.S. Senate for the next two years.

Tuck ran for Congress the following year, winning the election and finding himself seated next to another junior congressman, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln's views on slavery were still evolving when the two men served together, but over the course of the next few years he began to drift away from the Whig Party platform. Amos Tuck became more anti-slavery in his beliefs and, in March of 1854, held a meeting in Exeter at the Squamscott House that would create the Republican Party that Lincoln would later embrace.

The friendship continued even after both left Congress. It was at Tuck's suggestion that Robert Lincoln, having failed his Harvard entrance exams, enrolled at Phillips Exeter Academy in 1859 for a year of hard cramming. When Lincoln visited Exeter in the spring of 1860, Tuck was sorry to have missed him. He wrote to Lincoln shortly afterward, "I very much regretted that I was absent when you were at Exeter, and was sorry you did not call upon my family, even in my absence." Although we do not know exactly where Abraham Lincoln stayed while in Exeter, we can be fairly certain that he did not stay at the home of Amos Tuck. In spite of this, there is a plaque on the house at 89 Front St., which states that Lincoln did stay there. Given the close friendship between the two men, it would be more accurate if it read "Abraham Lincoln should have slept here."

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Amos Tuck, 1810 –1870, served in Congress with Abraham Lincoln and later went on to hold a meeting in Exeter that would be the founding of the Republican Party.

Exeter Historical Society photo



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